ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E 21

THE NEW YORK TIMES
20 May 1979

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SALT
CIA & Vietnam

WASHINGTON

Too Much SALT II

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 19 — The intelligence services of the United States Government report some interesting new developments along the eastern rim of Asia from the Sea of Japan to the South China Sea off Vietnam.

According to these reports, the Soviet Union is now making regular long-distance reconnaissance flights in TU-95's from Vladivostok in the U.S.S.R. to the big air base at Danang, built by the United States in the north of what used to be called South Vietnam. Among other things, these Soviet planes keep watch on the movement of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in that part of the world.

The Soviets are also now using the naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in South Vietnam, created at a cost of hundreds of millions by the United States. The irony is obvious and still painful.

The Soviet naval forces are not stationed there for long but are coming in for a few days and then leaving. Also, and more interestingly, the Russians are building a large modern communications base at Cam Ranh Bay, not particularly to watch the U.S. Seventh Fleet but particularly to listen in on the internal communications of mainland China.

Meanwhile, the United States is negotiating with Turkey to pay for its own listening posts in that country — not only to monitor Soviet missile launchings but to intercept Soviet internal communications.

These two incidents are mentioned here merely as a reminder that the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms treaty, about to be signed in Vienna next month, has an important but limited objective. It has never been regarded by either Government as a peace treaty, but simply as a device for cutting the costs and risks of offensive nuclear weapons, while the political, military and ideological conflicts between the two superpowers go on.

There is a tendency here in Washington, as usual, to debate the SALT II treaty as a thing apart. Even before the text has been published, let alone studied, the opponents are saying it would be a disaster to sign it and the Administration is saying it would be a disaster not to sign it. Political Washington is like that: the extremes dominate the debates, as if diplomacy were like plumbing, with nothing but hot or cold running water.

That, however, has little relation to the struggles and ambiguities of world politics. Mr. Carter cannot possibly prove that he can verify everything the Soviets are doing in the military field, even if he gets all the listening devices and bases he wants. And it is perhaps equally ridiculous for the opponents of SALT II to argue that if he can't verify everything, he should do nothing at Vienna. There are no certainties in politics or in life, as everybody who has tried to raise a child knows.

Nevertheless, it is easy to understand the doubts and suspicions of the opponents of the SALT treaty. Negotiating with the Soviets is a puzzle and a mystery. We have no record of their debates as they have of ours, no Soviet "Freedom of Information Act" in Moscow that would disclose the Soviet documents of the past.

Even at this late date, the Soviet experts in Washington have no reliable evidence of the role of the Soviet Government in the Korean War — what they were trying to do there — or of Khrushchev's purposes in trying to put nuclear missiles in Cuba. There hasn't even been a serious talk between the leaders of the two countries about the basic conflicts and common interests of Washington and Moscow since the middle days of Henry Kissinger.

Maybe President Carter can get down to basics again with President Brezhnev at Vienna next month, but this seems unlikely. The SALT II treaty will extend beyond Mr. Carter's term of office and probably beyond the authority or physical endurance of Mr. Brezhnev. The question is who and what will come later, and whether, at Vienna, despite everybody's doubts, the effort to control offensive nuclear arms should go on.

It is easy to get lost in all the technical arguments over the relative power of cruise missiles, Backfire bombers, multiple warheads on mobile platforms, and all the rest. But in the end, the SALT debate will probably come down to a simple question: whether the security of the United States would be better with this limited treaty or without it.

Clearly SALT II will not *settle* anything. The distrust of the two antagonistic societies, with their conflicting political, philosophical and even theological views of life, will go on. The Soviet planes will continue to shuttle between Vladivostok and Danang and their ships will come into Cam Ranh Bay, where they will monitor everything that they are suspicious about. The United States will do the same from Turkey and from our ships at sea and elsewhere.

Maybe this electronic snooping is not all that bad. The more the major nations know about what the others are doing or not doing the better. The SALT pact is only a part of the continuing conflict. It is intended merely to reduce the risks and costs and keep Washington and Moscow talking in hope that they will eventually see their common interest in developing a more sensible world order.